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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001951

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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y -- ADDED ADDRESSEES/SLUG LINES

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
SECDEF FOR USDP:ISA-ADMIN
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SCENE SETTER FOR SRI LANKA ARMY COMMANDER
FONSEKA'S NOVEMBER 28-29 VISIT TO WASHINGTON

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Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: General Sarath Fonseka, Commander of the Sri Lankan Army, will conduct a self-invited visit to Washington November 28-29 to meet with Department of State and Pentagon officials. Fonseka, the target of an April 2006 Tiger suicide-bombing attempt on his life, has pursued a hard-line policy toward the LTTE. Fonseka's visit represents an opportunity for State and Defense officials to underscore our support for the GSL and its right to defend itself against a terrorist, separatist insurgency. However, we also need to make clear that this support is neither uncritical nor unconditional. The U.S. believes strongly there is no military solution to the conflict. Our policy is aimed at bringing the parties back to the table. As the Ambassador has pointed out to the Secretary of Defense and other senior GSL officials, some recent SLA operations appear to go beyond responding proportionately to provocations; we want both parties to exercise maximum restraint and avoid all offensive operations.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY continued: We should also tell Fonseka that the credible allegations of collusion among rogue elements of the government and security forces with paramilitary groups such as the "Karuna faction" require an appropriate response. We should urge that the military end its ties with the renegade Karuna group and address security forces' human rights violations. We should also quietly inform Fonseka that continued pursuit of offensive military actions could result in the suspension of U.S. supply of offensive weapons such as the Bushmaster. The GSL also should expect some Members of the new Democratic Congress to take a keen interest in the deteriorating human rights situation in Sri Lanka. End Summary.

Short Biography

¶3. (C) General Sarath Fonseka, appointed Commander of the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) from December 6, 2005, commanded troops fighting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north of the island for most of his career in the infantry. He served twice as Commander of the Security Forces in Jaffna. The target of an April 2006 Tiger suicide-bombing attempt on his life, Fonseka has pursued a hard-line policy toward the LTTE. He is a Legal Permanent Resident of the U.S. currently residing in Sri Lanka under a waiver of the U.S. residency requirement. General Fonseka's appointment as Commander is subject to annual renewal. Secretary of Defense Gothabaya Rajapaksa has reportedly recommended Fonseka's extension when his current assignment expires in December 2006, but President Mahinda Rajapaksa (Gothabaya's brother) has yet to take action on it. Fonseka will conduct a self-invited visit to Washington November 28-29 to meet with Department of State and Pentagon officials.

Irrational Exuberance

¶3. (C) Since July 2006, Sri Lanka's military establishment has been characterized by an attitude of over-confidence. Fonseka and other military leaders seem to believe a military defeat of the LTTE is possible. On the ground, there have been numerous and significant ceasefire violations by both sides, which initially produced successes for the government side. In July, security forces reopened a water sluice in Mavilaru forcibly closed by the LTTE, then captured Sampur, an area south of Trincomalee harbor from which LTTE artillery had threatened ships. Periodic Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) raids temporarily paralyzed Tiger artillery positions on Pooneryn, from which the Tigers threatened the Jaffna peninsula, as well as Sea Tiger bases in the east. The Sri Lanka Navy intercepted several LTTE supply shipments, ranging from a large ship to small trawlers carrying weapons.

¶4. (C) In October, however - just days before the parties were to meet in Geneva -- an ill-considered Sri Lankan Army offensive at the Jaffna Forward Defense Line (FDL) went seriously awry; the Army suffered hundreds of casualties and lost six tanks. Then, an LTTE truck bomb at Habarana killed

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over 100 sailors. Finally, the Sea Tigers attacked a Sri Lanka Navy base at Galle, in the deep South, demonstrating they could strike anywhere in the country and putting a serious dent in the important tourism industry. Despite these apparent defeats, the military establishment seems to remain fixed on establishing decisive military superiority over the LTTE.

Human Rights Record Murky

¶5. (C) During Fonseka's tenure, and especially in the last few months, the human rights situation has deteriorated markedly. Following a 10-day mission to Sri Lanka, United Nations Special Advisor on Children and Armed Conflict Allen Rock told the press his mission "found strong and credible evidence that elements of the government security forces are supporting and sometimes participating in the abductions and forced recruitment of children by the Karuna faction." Rock cited eyewitness reports in which security forces had detained young Tamil males from which Karunas could select fresh recruits. The Nordic-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission backed Rock's claims in a November 14 public statement.

¶6. (C) While the Sri Lanka military has been forthcoming in providing individual names for Leahy amendment vetting, they have been reluctant to give us names of units under investigation for human rights abuses for our ACES database.

Military Assistance

¶7. (C) The military establishment appears to suffer from a selective hearing loss regarding our policy towards counter-terrorism and the peace process in Sri Lanka. We have stressed that we support military assistance for self-defense but that we do not believe there is a military solution to this conflict. Military sources have told DATTA that the SLA perception is that the U.S. supports offensive moves against the LTTE in a common battle against global terrorism despite our public and private messages urging restraint.

¶8. (C) The military is requesting additional training in such areas as psy-ops and civil affairs. The Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) wishes to purchase Bushmaster 30 mm guns for its fast attack craft, which will provide a critical advantage over Sea Tiger gunboats. Given ongoing Sri Lankan military actions, we believe it is time to signal to the GSL that continued offensive military actions and disproportionately strong responses to LTTE actions would oblige the U.S. to suspend provision of offensive weapons such as the Bushmaster. We recommend Washington use the Fonseka visit to quietly signal this change in policy. If approved, Ambassador will deliver same message to the Foreign Minister and Defense Secretary Rajapaksa on the Ambassador's return from the November 20-21 Co-Chairs meeting in Washington.

¶9. (C) The Embassy, with concurrence from the Department, cancelled the October 2006 Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) exercise citing force protections concerns. However, while the MEU was, in fact, suspended for security-related reasons, we also did not want to further embolden the military to respond disproportionately to LTTE attacks or plan offensive operations. The GSL was disappointed and has already put us on notice that they will want to reschedule the MEU next year.

Clarifying Our Message

¶10. (SBU) Post recommends the following general talking points for all meetings:

-- Don't get carried away with perceptions of Tiger weakness or opportunities for military victories. Tigers still highly capable; there is no military solution.

-- Exercise maximum restraint; cease offensive operations. US concerned that GSL has gone beyond defensive actions in

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recent engagements. Such actions risk LTTE retaliation in kind which could jeopardize any prospect for peace talks -- our highest priority.

-- We must hold a legitimate, elected government to a higher standard than a terrorist group. That's why the US Embassy issued a statement after the Vakarai shelling that killed approximately 60 IDPs.

-- Stop tolerating abductions and child soldier recruitment by Karuna faction.

-- GSL should hold itself accountable for human rights violations. We are willing to help with this, both on civilian and military side.

-- Failure to refrain from disproportionate responses and, especially, attempts to go on the offensive could result in suspension of U.S. military assistance particularly supply of offensive weapons.

-- Members of the new Democratic majority in the House have expressed concern about human rights violations by the Sri

Lankan military. The GSL should expect greater scrutiny and attention from the new Congress.

BLAKE